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FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2803
INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 9514
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 1395
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 8829
RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 7679
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1566
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C O N F I D E N T I A L DHAKA 006777

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/13/2016

TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: CHIEF ADVISER ASSURES ARMY WILL BE NEUTRAL

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia Butenis, reason para 1.4 d.

¶1. (C) Summary. Chief Adviser Ahmed told Ambassador that controversial Election Commissioner Modahbir Chowdhury will be replace with a pro-Awami League civil servant, and that army units deployed in aid to civil administration have strict instructs to act neutrally. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On December 13, Ambassador met for 25 minutes with Chief Adviser Iajuddin Ahmed. Presidential adviser Mukhlesur Rahman and polcouns (notetaker) sat in.

¶3. (C) Ambassador began by recalling that she had strongly supported the caretaker government at its outset, urging Awami League president Sheikh Hasina to give Chief Adviser extra time to demonstrate his commitment to a free and fair election, and calling on both parties to stop pressuring the government, either on the streets or behind the scenes. However, she said, two recent developments have raised concern: the resignation of four caretaker government advisers who had worked effectively to promote inter-party dialogue, and the nationwide deployment of the army well in advance of elections when there was no evident law and order justification.

¶4. (C) She noted that the caretaker government had been at its best when Ahmed and his advisers had worked together, and created a climate wherein the Awami League stopped its blockade programs and started cooperating with the Election Commission on voter list corrections. It is important to empower the new advisers to be active to counter perceptions that the caretaker government acts at the behest of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. It was unfortunate, she observed, that controversial Election Commissioner Zakaria could not be persuaded to depart since the aborted compromise electoral package seemed so close to agreement.

¶5. (C) Ahmed replied that he had prevailed upon Chief Election Commissioner M.A. Aziz to go on leave, and is prepared to take other actions to break the political impasse. Before Sultana Kamal resigned as a caretaker government adviser, she reported Hasina's agreement to the replacement of Modahbir Hussain Chowdhury, one of the newly appointed election commissioners with pronounced ties to the former ruling party, with Jamibul Haq, a retired civil servant known to be strongly pro-Awami League. He indicated that this and other issues would be discussed in a meeting with the advisers tonight. Regarding Zakaria, Ahmed made it clear he is not prepared to force the issue without the endorsement of Bangladesh Nationalist Party chairperson Khaleda Zia.

¶6. (C) Ahmed assured Ambassador that the army would act neutrally, and agreed to receive from Ambassador any reports to the contrary. He had stressed to the three service chiefs, he said, that their only mission is to aid civil administration, and acknowledged that troublemakers exist on both sides of the political divide.

¶7. (C) The current situation, Ahmed concluded, "looks positive," and he reiterated his confidence that both major political parties would join the election.

BUTENIS